IV. NO GAS TODAY

Every month, Colonel Jimmy Harris' CIS personnel geared up to present an exhaustively researched and well-rehearsed manuscript briefing known as the MISTA (Monthly Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis). Attended by General Murray, the Ambassador or his representative, and a host of other key military and civilian members of the mission, the MISTA traditionally concluded with predictions concerning the direction of the continuing war. Normally, Walt Mestre and I insured the entry of cleared personnel to the CIS conference room, although I was occasionally drafted to perform as one of the two "talking dogs" who delivered the briefings. As a regular follower of the morning updates and the MISTA, I quickly learned the extent to which the North Vietnamese were disregarding the provisions of the Paris Agreement. The in-boxes of the CIS analysts overflowed with hard evidence of the North Vietnamese buildup. One thing was absolutely certain -- Hanoi clearly regarded the Paris Agreement as a green light for unrestricted military preparations, regardless of one's position on the purpose of the buildup.

Much has been written since 1975 confirming Hanoi's exploitation of the cease-fire, but no single work made as strong an impression on me as the recollections of Senior General Van Tien Dung, the North Vietnamese officer who commanded Hanoi's forces during the final drive to victory. In his account of this period, Dung openly acknowledged North Vietnam's use of the cease-fire to prepare for the drive to "final victory" from 1973 to 1975. This is an excerpt from his testimonial:

A rule of revolutionary war is to start with small units and proceed to large-scale corps and branches and then attack the cities, and the nerve centers of the enemy government. Only in this way could we defeat the enemy and liberate the fatherland. Thus, we had to have an ample number of wide roads and facilities for transportation of mechanized equipment to ensure enough grain, food, ammunition and weapons for the frontline. The strategic route east of the Truong Son range, which was completed in early 1975, was the result of the labor of more than 30,000 troops and shock youths. The length of this route, added to that of the other old and new strategic routes used during the various campaigns during the last war, is more than 20,000 kms. The eight-meter wide route of more than 1000 kilometers, which we could see now, is our pride. With 5,000 miles of pipeline laid through deep rivers and streams and on mountains more than 1,000 meters high, we were capable of providing enough food for various battlefronts. More than 10,000 transportation vehicles were put on the road.
As I read Dung’s account for the first time in 1977, the narrative had a familiar ring. It was as if I had been transported back in time to the CIS conference room and was listening to the MISTA briefings. Even though the American withdrawal had weakened our intelligence collection capabilities, Colonel Harris’ CIS personnel had put together an incredibly detailed and accurate picture of Hanoi’s activities. Senior General Dung himself could not have developed a MISTA that would have been much more effective in depicting the scope of Hanoi’s efforts, however more credible he would have been as a briefer. The morale of the Saigonese was low, but I wondered what might have been the effect had the people known the full extent of Hanoi’s preparations for South Vietnam’s undoing.

As it was, the US Embassy and the South Vietnamese Ministry of Information had made many details of the military situation a matter of public record in an effort to turn public opinion against Hanoi. Even the Saigon taxi drivers began to ask me about the improvement of airfields by Communist forces in the “liberated zones.” Horror stories of massive amounts of NVA armor and artillery pouring down the modernized, all-weather Ho Chi Minh Trail circulated freely through the capitol. Even government television featured documentary programs that harped constantly on Hanoi’s exploitation of the cease-fire. New propaganda banners castigating Hanoi appeared regularly on the streets of Saigon -- "Don’t listen to what the Communists say, but watch carefully what the Communists do!" But these attempts to mobilize the population against the Communists were not without their drawbacks. The more the Americans and the South Vietnamese beat the drums about the perfidious North Vietnamese buildup, the more frightened and depressed the South Vietnamese people became.

One day in late October, I again met with Major Sang. The usually cheerful Sang was not himself as he described how an entire battalion of the ARVN 25th Division had recently been ambushed and mauled during a sweep operation in northern Hau Nghia. The unit had pursued a small group of enemy soldiers and had been sucked into the kill zone of an NVA trap. When enemy troops triggered the ambush, the ARVN command group had been the first casualties -- the battalion commander died instantly, and his executive officer had his jaw shot away. After that, the unit lost discipline and suffered heavy losses. The last report seen by Sang had admitted losses of 46 men killed, 126 wounded, and over 200 missing in action. Dozens of weapons had been lost to the enemy, and the defeat was so bad that the ARVN command had
concealed it from President Thieu for two days. Shortly there-

after, the division commander was relieved of his command.

Even though local defeats such as this were clearly the 

exception rather than the rule during 1973, the people seemed 
to regard them as portents of the future. South Vietnam was 
the victim of a progressive disease, and the chief symptom 
was the erosion of the people's confidence in ultimate vic-
tory. By mid-November 1973, I concluded that the signs point-
ed to defeat for South Vietnam. I described these conditions 
in a letter to my brother in California:

The situation over here is bad. The North Vietnam-
ese are building up their forces in total disregard 
of the treaty, while we are scrupulously sticking 
to the one-for-one replacement of combat losses as 
permitted by the treaty. If there is a general offen-
sive and the NVA begins to move close to Saigon, I 
look for South Vietnamese anger and frustration to 
take the form of openly hostile anti-Americanism. 
It could be that the streets of Saigon will be 
more dangerous than the swamps of Hu" Nghia ever 
were, and that's no joke. Bitter anti-US resent-
ment is just below the surface now, since the 
Vietnamese view the Paris Agreements as having the 
effect of "legitimizing" the VC movement and lend-
ting tacit legitimacy to North Vietnamese presence 
in South Vietnam, closer than ever before to Saigon 
and other population centers. What a mess! In 
the absence of renewed US Air Force support, the 
next general offensive, if launched, will result 
in Americans being evacuated from this country. 
I'm sure the only thing that will inhibit North 
Vietnam from launching the attack is Nixon's total 
unpredictability.²

About this time, I considered writing a report to General 
Murray to communicate my conviction that Vietnamese morale 
had dangerously deteriorated and that we faced a serious risk 
of anti-American reactions in Saigon. I began twice to draft 
a report but hesitated on both occasions. I asked myself 
whether I was overreacting to the situation. If so, did I 
want to confront General Murray with an alarmist report? After 
all, I had been back in Vietnam for only three months, and Saigon 
might not be representative of the whole country. Still, I was 
disturbed by the failure of most Americans to understand the 
serious decline in South Vietnamese morale. Even though 
various reports leaving the DAO registered concern over the 
impact of inflation on the South Vietnamese military, none of 
the reports that I saw reflected an appreciation of the disint-
egration of morale that I was witnessing. Ultimately, I de-
cided to postpone my report to the General in favor of a "wait 
and see" posture.

In early December, the North Vietnamese struck still an-
other blow at the declining morale of the Saigonese. I became 
aware of a problem when I spotted a colossal pillar of black 
smoke churning its way up in the southeastern sky. Pulling 
into the DAO parking lot, I pointed to the smoke and asked the
Vietnamese guard at the gate what had happened. "Nha Be, Dai Uy, Nha Be. Vietcong dang danh Nha Be!" he answered excitedly. (The Vietcong are attacking Nha Be!). Oh Lord! Nha Be was the location of a huge gasoline and oil storage tank farm on the Saigon River. By the time I entered the building, the smoke had blotted out the morning sun and cast an eerie shadow over the city.

The phones in the operations center were tied up as our analysts attempted to find out exactly what was happening. Was it a Communist ground attack? If so, were the Communists attacking only Nha Be or other places as well? On my way down the DAO corridor, I met two frightened Vietnamese secretaries who had heard a rumor on their way to work that the Vietcong were attacking the entire area around Saigon. Initial reports from the Joint General Staff Headquarters indicated that a barrage of enemy rockets had detonated millions of liters of precious fuel stored in the Nha Be tanks. Our analysts expected a clearer picture of the drama from an American civilian who happened to be on the scene when the enemy launched his attack. The lone American was rushing from tank to tank and frantically turning valves in a vain and heroic effort to contain the damage.
Communist sappers scored this success against the Nha Be tank farm in December 1973.
Later in the day, the rocket attack version of the Nha Be incident fell through. Long before the fires were extinguished, we learned that a squad of Vietcong sappers had penetrated the lightly defended perimeter of the tank farm and had blown several of the tanks with plastic explosives. There had been no rockets fired from across the river as originally reported by the Nha Be garrison. Discovery of an attacker's body floating in the Saigon River was concrete proof that enemy sappers had conducted the attack. From the standpoint of cost versus results, the Nha Be attack must rank as one of the most successful sabotage operations of the Vietnam War. At a cost of one or two men killed, the Communists blew up 35 million liters of fuel, destroyed a significant percentage of South Vietnam's petroleum storage capacity, and inflicted an economic and psychological defeat of massive proportions.

Even as the mushroom cloud of smoke rose higher in the sky, the ever-alert Saigonese began to mob the city's filling stations. As I returned to my quarters that afternoon, I witnessed scenes of pandemonium at every station. Hordes of anxious citizens were panic-buying the remaining supply of fuel. Lines of cars, Hondas, and three-wheeled Lambrettas stretched for hundreds of yards in all directions around the Caltex station near the old Massachusetts BOQ. Each line ended in confusion and disorder at the pumps. No one had ever taught the Saigonese how to queue up and await their turn.

President Thieu responded to the crisis by ordering all filling stations temporarily closed and detailing the national police to guard the pumps. When sale of the precious fuel resumed the following day, the price quickly shot up from 105 to 240 piasters a liter, or approximately $1.75 a gallon. The North Vietnamese had dealt a severe blow to the economic viability of South Vietnam and, at the same time, had increased the apprehension of an already tense citizenry. More than ever, the Saigonese realized their vulnerability to the growing North Vietnamese threat. The North Vietnamese were once again beginning to take on the stature of a ten-foot-tall enemy.

Shortly after the Nha Be attack, I received permission to travel to Hau Nghia province. The trip posed a welcome opportunity to get out of Saigon, and I looked forward to a nostalgic visit to my former home. It was simply difficult to avoid a siege mentality in Saigon, especially since the propensity for intelligence officers to "worst-case" all analysis had earned for us the appellation of "purveyors of doom and gloom." By the end of 1973, there was enough doom and gloom for everyone
in the US mission.

The trip to Hau Nghia province proved informative and therapeutic. Accompanied by two of Colonel Harris’ civilian analysts, I spent a fast-moving day with Major Sang and the Province G-2, Major Nga. We had the opportunity to meet Colonel Soan, the new province chief, who turned out to be an impressive officer widely known for his heroic exploits in Quang Tri province during the 1972 offensive. As I had hoped, the Hau Nghia trip enabled me to put the situation in better perspective. All in all, I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat relieved at what we saw and heard during our brief sojourn in rural Vietnam. Shortly after the Hau Nghia trip, I recorded my assessment of the situation at the end of 1973:

... These political organs set up by the Paris Agreement are not going to accomplish anything in my opinion, not the way things look now. The North Vietnamese are infiltrating men, equipment, and materiel as fast as they can push it down the trail. Of course, this is a reflection not only of their normal and natural desire to defend the so-called liberated area because they don’t trust the South Vietnamese any more than the South Vietnamese trust them. It also reflects their desire to keep their options open by developing a military capability which will enable them to launch another big offensive such as what they did in 1972. Should they elect to do this, your guess is as good as mine whether this country will make it. I know this sounds dumb, but, with me, my confidence in South Vietnam’s chances for survival seems to change from day to day. The morale of the Saigon troops and officers is really low, partly because the economic situation in the capital is so bad. Many don’t have enough money for rice. I’ve had officers in the Saigon area -- colonels -- tell me that, if the enemy launches a surprise attack in MR-111, the northern area near An Loc, and drives southward, he could be in Saigon almost overnight. If he attacks at midnight, he’ll be here in the morning. This opinion was expressed to me two days ago by a Vietnamese lieutenant colonel who is the G-2 at the Capital Military District. That’s not for publication, but it’s his opinion, and right or wrong (I think he’s overly pessimistic), it is revealing.

On the other hand, I sometimes get the impression that things aren’t as bad as the picture one sees in Saigon -- that the morale is lower here because the people see the problems. The officers and men in Saigon see more of the problems and weaknesses close at hand. They don’t see the strengths. I just went to Hau Nghia province last Friday and spent a whole day there. I took two American civilian intelligence analysts out there to introduce them around and assist them in establishing liaison. And I was encouraged with what I saw. When I came back, I was pretty pleased and proud to have worked out there...

We arrived at the province capital at about 9:00. It was like going home for me -- just like going home. Major Nga, the G-2, had the hottest of the hot information when he greeted us. He’d just interrogated a raider from an NVA unit in Cambodia, and his source had described how a 50-truck convoy was transporting Communist supplies from Cambodia right into northern Hau Nghia. Trucks! They used to carry the stuff on foot; now they just load it on trucks....

We had coffee at a little restaurant, and I went out into the street as troops of the 305th RF battalion passed by on their way to the field. They’re well-trained troops with good esprit, and they told me that there were more VC than ever before, especially
at night. They boasted that they were killing more than ever before and getting a lot of their weapons. I asked them, "You know, I would think that your morale would be real low. Everybody expected peace after the cease-fire, yet no peace came. Doesn't that bother you?"

On sergeant answered, "When you work and live in Hau Nghia as many years as we have and go on as many operations as we have -- and fight the enemy as long as we have, you never think that there's going to be peace just because somebody signed some piece of paper in Paris. We didn't think that the VC would just go away; so it's just business as usual for us." I was a little surprised at their answer, but glad to hear it. If one judged the morale here based on the Saigon garrison, just forget it!

During lunch at Major Nga's house, I had a reunion with Lanh, an NVA sergeant whom I converted into a rattler after his capture in '72. He is now a PFC in the RF, and pretty content with his lot in life. If he had remained a POW, he would have already been repatriated during the prisoner exchange, and he'd be on his way down the Ho Chi Minh Trail again. Only this time he wouldn't be walking; he'd be riding in a Molotov truck. And, instead of taking over 100 days like it did in '71, it would take him about ten days altogether...

After lunch, it was time to visit Duc Hue district. The terrible road that used to batter my spine has been repaved by the Vietnam Sugar Company in anticipation of reopening the Hiep Hoa sugar mill. At our former compound, things have changed a lot. The District Chief now lives in the old advisors' house, and the perimeter has gone to pot. It is surrounded by tall grass. Sappers could get them very easily... While we were there, PF platoon #28 was ambushed right across the river. We could hear the gunfire. They suffered five killed and eight wounded. They were out protecting the harvest. It's the rice war going on now. Hau Nghia has had more casualties in the last four weeks than they had in '72 when two NVA regiments invaded. They've had 120 men killed defending the people during the rice harvest. In '72 they had over 130 killed, but that was over a six-week period.

By then it was four o'clock, so we joined a bunch of my Vietnamese friends and drove to Tan My village for a beer. There were about eight of us in my sedan, which bottomed on the metal bridge in Hiep Hoa and stuck in low gear. We drove to Tan My in low, where a couple of villagers set about jury-rigging the linkage so we could return to Saigon. While they worked on the car, the Tan My village cadre filled me in on events since my departure. I was sorry to learn that many of my old friends had been killed or wounded since the cease-fire. Lt. Ngu, the Duc Hue S-1, drank beer one night at Tan My and tried to go back to District Headquarters at eight o'clock. He and two sergeants -- there were three of them on one Honda -- headed back, but were killed by two VC who jumped out on the road and sprayed them with AK fire. Captain Nghia, the former S-3, is in Cong Hoa hospital in Saigon after being wounded when a Navy boat was ambushed on the Van Co Dong river. Captain Ky, Hau Nghia's best company commander, was shot in the head leading his unit on a night operation. And so on -- it just read like that -- the war never stopped...

Anyway, we got the car fixed, though it was late and I was becoming worried. We barely made it back to Saigon before dark. It was a good visit for me, and I was gratified to see them working out there -- doing the things they have to do -- running their intelligence shop professionally in the way we worked together with them and got them to do.

The Hau Nghia trip had been the high point of my tour thus far; it had injected some balance into my picture of the situation. I had been encouraged by the realization that not every South Vietnamese military man had succumbed to pessimism in the face
of Hanoi's determined stance. Nonetheless, I wondered how long the fabric of South Vietnamese society could stand up under the continued bloodletting of the "cease-fire." If Hau Nghia's losses were representative, Hanoi was inflicting severe punishment on South Vietnam for its persistent anti-Communism.

Trip to Hau Nghia province, December 1973. The author and Colonel Suad, Province Chief. Suad was captured by the North Vietnamese and remains to this date in an "indoctrination camp" in the Mekong Delta.

L to R: Major Sang, Hau Nghia MSS Chief, and Major Nga, G-2. Sang escaped in April 1975; Nga was not so lucky--he died defending the Hau Nghia Sector Headquarters on the last day of the war.
Trip to Hau Nghia province, December 1973. The author and Colonel Soan, Province Chief. Soan was captured by the North Vietnamese and remains to this date in an "indoctrination camp" in the Mekong Delta.

L to R: Major Sang, Hau Nghia MSS Chief, and Major Nga, G-2. Sang escaped in April 1975; Nga was not so lucky—He died defending the Hau Nghia Sector Headquarters on the last day of the war.
V. ARMAGEDDON OR MINI-ARMAGEDDON?

I soon concluded that the sole redeeming feature of my position in Saigon was what intelligence officers call its "placement and access." The SSO job provided an excellent vantage point to observe developments in cease-fire Vietnam. My problem was that I couldn't get accustomed to the role of passive observer. I found it impossible to develop any enthusiasm for the mundane chore of couriering classified documents around the DAO Headquarters. To be sure, the job itself was both essential and important, but it just wasn't for me. As classified courier and guardian of the secure area, I had neither the requirement to understand the local language nor the opportunity to use my background and experience in Southeast Asia. I envied the civilians who held the intelligence liaison jobs in Colonel Le Gro's organization, even though I knew that the Paris Agreement had terminated our military role in Vietnam. As 1973 drew to a close, I began to count the days until my transfer to the Joint Military Team. At least the new job required an officer with my background. In the SSO shop, I spoke Vietnamese once a week in supervising the maids who cleaned the restroom in the secure area.

During my brief stint in the SSO business, Walt Mestre and I accomplished one important task. Concerned about the huge quantities of classified documents stored in the DAO, we tested the methods for destroying documents and proved conclusively that the thermite grenades designated for emergency destruction were totally useless. Our experiment convinced everyone in attendance that we had no effective method for rapidly destroying classified documents -- a lesson learned the hard way by the crew of the Pueblo in 1968. The only sensible course was to avoid storing large quantities of sensitive documents. We targeted our show on Colonel Harris' CIS personnel, who were notorious pack rats. Their offices in the secure area were so full of classified material that it could never be destroyed in the event of an emergency.

Whether the situation might some day require such drastic steps had become the focus of quite a debate in Saigon by the end of 1973. To the South Vietnamese, the question of the hour was whether the United States would reintervene when the North Vietnamese launched the next major offensive.
Americans focused their attention on a different question. The great debate of the cease-fire period centered around Hanoi's military intentions. Bombarded as we were by daily reminders of North Vietnam's inexorable buildup, few of us doubted Hanoi's capability to escalate the fighting well above the bloody pace of the so-called "peace." The daily region-by-region briefings tracked the NVA moves with uncanny accuracy and revealed the rebuilding of airfields, the laying of pipelines, and the moving of weapons and ammunition down the refurbished Ho Chi Minh Trail. The picture was grim by any measure. The Hanoi government was clearly moving as rapidly as possible in the south to create an integrated and viable command tied together by a new network of roads and armed with the latest Soviet and Chinese hardware.

Observers were divided in their interpretation of this activity. Some analysts insisted that Hanoi's leaders were determined to use their rapidly developing military fist in a general offensive to topple South Vietnam as soon as possible. But few responsible Americans subscribed to this belief during late 1973 and early 1974. The major proponents of the general offensive theory were the South Vietnamese. President Thieu's government continually sounded the alarm that the Communists were about to mount another onslaught like the 1972 Easter Offensive. American analysts were more cautious. DAO estimates tended to support the thesis that even though the Communists were building their military machine in the south for eventual conquest of the country, this did not necessarily portend an all-out, country-wide offensive.

Most of the CIS analysts argued that the NVA would most likely launch a series of phased, limited offensives designed to improve its strategic position and demoralize the ARVN. The Communists were employing military pressure to extract a heavy price in blood and money from President Thieu's government for its refusal to negotiate the political settlement envisioned in the Paris Agreement. When captured Communist documents asserted that "the path of revolutionary violence" must be followed in the south, CIS analysts concluded that Hanoi had elected to rely upon military means to force the Thieu government into accepting a Communist political role. To be safe, CIS estimates deliberately left open the possibility that Hanoi might play its military card, depending upon

* A detailed exposition of the intelligence reporting of the cease-fire period is outside the scope of this work. For a comprehensive treatment of this subject, see Colonel William Le Gro's Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation, to be published by the Government Printing Office in 1980.
South Vietnamese and American responses. Hanoi had the capability and, hence, the option to convert a phased, limited offensive into something more serious. For this kind of comprehensive forecasting, the DAO analysts acquired the unwarranted reputation in some quarters of being overly alarmist and hawkish. One regular attendee at the CIS briefings was Frank Snepp, the CIA analyst who subsequently recounted his Vietnam experiences in a controversial book entitled Decent Interval. In his book, Frank describes CIA personnel as "...hawkish intelligence analysts at DAO" and erroneously recalls that the CIS analysts "...had been predicting a general offensive every month since the first day of the cease-fire." 1 In a unique and imaginative interpretation of American politics in cease-fire Saigon, Frank argues that Colonel Le Gro's intelligence organization played into Ambassador Graham Martin's hands because it provided the kind of "alarmist" reporting that enabled the Ambassador to paint a sufficiently grim picture of the situation to justify continued high levels of American aid.

Documenting capabilities is one thing; unlocking intentions is something quite different. In fact, none of us really knew Hanoi's specific military intentions in the south. The DAO intelligence analysts did a superb job of monitoring and reporting the alarming increase in NVA capabilities and reminding everyone that these capabilities broadened Hanoi's range of options. Although I was no better at fathoming Communist intentions than anyone else, I did believe that the South Vietnamese would probably suffer a fatal military reversal if the enemy went for broke. The more familiar I became with the friendly situation, the more I was convinced that defeat was inevitable.

Despite the carefully worded CIS assessments, all of us were aware that we sat on a time bomb and that the North Vietnamese added new sticks of dynamite to the bomb every day. With each additional move by the Communists, such as the attack on Nha Be or the seizure of a district capital, we wondered whether it marked the beginning of a major push. The history of the Vietnam War was simply too fresh in our minds and we had too many daily reminders of our increasing vulnerability to be optimistic about the future. Even Ambassador Martin's Special Assistant, George Jacobson, was living proof that anyone could be overtaken by the unexpected in Vietnam. During the 1968 Tet Offensive, Jacobson, a retired colonel, had suddenly found himself sharing a house on the Embassy grounds with the last survivor of a VC suicide squad that had seized the compound. The colonel had waited until the VC emptied his
AK-47 up the stairwell and then had killed the intruder with a pistol tossed to him only moments earlier by an MP in the courtyard below. His colleagues later presented him with the dead VC's weapon, on which was engraved, "A VC fired this, and missed. The Colonel fired back -- and didn't!"

One particular incident illustrated the prevailing mood in Saigon at that time -- the sense that the next move was up to Hanoi and that no option was too bizarre to rule out. I arrived at work early one morning to find all the DAO gates closed and guarded. A nervous Vietnamese security guard informed me that an alert had been called during the night. I learned at the operations center that the Marine security guard at the Ambassador's quarters had reported shots fired outside the residence during the night. The Marine had returned the fire and reinforcements had been dispatched to the scene, even though no one seemed to know the size of the enemy force. The attack appeared to be an isolated event, since there were no reports of any other actions in Saigon.

General Murray found an unusually large crowd of interested observers when he arrived for the regular morning briefing. The briefer struggled to keep a deadpan expression as he related the sequence of events. After the initial alert and the dispatch of Marine reinforcements to the scene, the DAO had sent a FLASH message containing sketchy details of the attack to the White House Situation Room and the National Military Command Center. Ambassador Martin had been awakened and spirited off for safekeeping before it became clear that the whole thing was a false alarm. To everyone's embarrassment, the Marine on duty had mistaken an exploding safety valve on a water heater for hostile fire! The DAO had immediately sent out a second message directing all addressees to disregard the initial report. For those not involved in the ludicrous incident, it was the source of a good laugh. The Marines had tested their alert procedures under realistic conditions, although one wondered whether the Ambassador would fully appreciate the humor of the hostile water heater. Even General Murray managed a laugh in spite of the embarrassing messages that had gone out to the world from his office. The event served as a reminder that we were living in a country where the unexpected had all too often reigned supreme. Even though everyone had enjoyed a good laugh at the Marines' expense, we knew that this sort of attack was not inconceivable.

Anyone following the awesome growth of Hanoi's capabilities could not avoid a sense of trepidation, but the Communist
threat did not concern me as deeply as the situation within the South Vietnamese armed forces. In the wake of the Yom Kippur War, the quadrupling of the price of oil had triggered double-digit inflation in the United States, and the resulting pinch was felt in Saigon. As the costs of purchasing ammunition, fuel, and other essentials rose, the real purchasing power of the military assistance dollars pledged to the Saigon government eroded. This situation alone was serious enough to hinder South Vietnam's capability to counter the Hanoi threat in the long run. But, as 1974 drew on, the tone of the debate in Washington gave rise to fears that Congress might not approve the administration's request for 1.4 billion dollars in military assistance for the Saigon government. When Congress ultimately appropriated only half of this sum, the psychological impact on the South Vietnamese was devastating.

To both Vietnamese parties, the debate over military aid to South Vietnam meant considerably more than the question of military hardware. Both Hanoi and Saigon viewed the success or failure of the administration in getting its aid bill through Congress as a barometer of the American commitment to South Vietnam. The single most important effect of cuts in American aid was not measurable in the number of aircraft that the South Vietnamese had to mothball or by the damaged armored vehicles that could not be rebuilt because of a lack of funds. The reductions in aid contributed to the demoralization of the South Vietnamese military and were thus as damaging psychologically as materially. Time and again, I heard South Vietnamese military men bemoan the fact that their country had been cursed with a faltering ally, while the Communists enjoyed the luxury of two faithful sponsors, each vying to outdo the other in generosity. As I soon learned from the Communists themselves during my travels to Hanoi, the North Vietnamese interpreted congressional reluctance to underwrite the costs of continued fighting as "the voice of the progressive American people" protesting their government's "neocolonialist policies." The aid issue was a simple equation in which Saigon's psychological and material losses were Hanoi's gains.

In looking back on this period, I believe we witnessed the political and military collapse of South Vietnam in 1974, even though it was not readily apparent to the casual observer. Westerners tend to associate political collapse with a coup d'état or the resignation of a chief of state, whereas military collapse brings to mind visions of disintegrating armies and fleeing soldiers. Even though these events didn't occur until
1975, the die was cast during 1974. By autumn of that year, President Thieu was politically bankrupt. He stood convicted in the eyes of his countrymen for failing in his ultimate task -- the all-important role of liaison officer and lobbyist in charge of relations with Washington. Most Vietnamese viewed President Thieu as the best man for the job because of his effectiveness in dealing with the Americans. Thieu meant stability, and stability was Washington's major precondition for continued aid. However, the onerous terms of the Paris Agreement and the cutbacks in American aid symbolized to the Vietnamese man in the street that President Thieu had fallen from favor in Washington. The "Mandate of Heaven" that traditionally lent legitimacy to Vietnamese rulers had come to mean "the Mandate of Washington." In fact, one central tenet of Communist propaganda accepted by a surprisingly large number of South Vietnamese was Hanoi's depiction of Nguyen Van Thieu as a "puppet of the Americans."

During my tour in Hau Nghia province in 1971 and 1972, I had become deeply concerned with the widespread corruption I had encountered in the Vietnamese government and armed forces. I had left Vietnam in 1972 convinced that the survival of South Vietnam depended partly on the success of President Thieu's government in eliminating this problem. It was simply wishful thinking to dismiss corruption in the Saigon government by rationalizing that most Asian countries were corrupt. South Vietnam and its Asian neighbors differed in one significant respect: The Saigon government was engaged in a death struggle with an insurgency backed by some 200,000 North Vietnamese soldiers. President Thieu could not afford to expose a weak flank to the enemy any more than he could afford a hostile American press bent on exposing his regime as corrupt and unpopular. But, as the South Vietnamese economy stagnated, corruption increased as government bureaucrats and military men alike struggled to make economic ends meet. This, in turn, generated an unprecedented public outcry against the government. Caught between a growing Communist threat and a declining economy, the people of South Vietnam became increasingly indignant over the issue of continuing corruption. Time and time again, my Vietnamese friends sought me out to decry the wholesale corruption at all levels. As time went on, popular disenchantment was directed more and more at President Thieu himself. "The house leaks from the roof on down" was the expression used by the Saigonese to describe their conviction that President Thieu was responsible for the corruption.
The military became increasingly concerned that, unless corruption could be checked, the armed forces would be unable to counter the anticipated Communist general offensive. The South Vietnamese Military Security Service (MSS) investigated Army strengths and weaknesses and sent out a damning report of its findings to the commanding general of Military Region III. A copy of the report ultimately reached American hands, unquestionably without the approval of the government. In extremely blunt language, the report impugned the integrity of many military commanders and openly expressed deep concern for the future. One section entitled "Shortcomings" discussed the morale of the armed forces in these terms:

Since the cease-fire, military operations of RVNAF have become less active because of the declining morale of the soldiers who either did not want to endure hardship or were too confident in the cease-fire agreement. A remarkable factor taking place beside the enthusiastic fighting of the majority of the soldiers is the corruption of a number of command echelons who escape responsibility, avoid hardship, and engage in activities for personal gain. They provide regular leave authorization to soldiers who desire to be away from the unit.

The reference to allowing "regular leave authorization" was an acknowledgement of "Linh Bong," or "Flower Soldiers." Flower soldiers were allowed to stay away from their units for extended periods without being declared AWOL. In exchange for this privilege, they usually compensated their commanders with a mutually acceptable sum of money. My Vietnamese contacts advised me that flower soldiers always showed up for unit musters, inspections, and payday, but never for combat operations.

The report also addressed the worsening economic situation in unusually candid terms:

Enlisted men can hardly support their families on their small salaries, especially when they are away from their families. In Sep and Oct 73 the Commander, MR 3, personally visited the Central Military District (CMD), ARVN divisions, Military Sectors and Special Zones in MR 3 and talked with military and administrative command echelons concerning the economic struggle. He gave instructions to servicemen and cadre at all levels to closely coordinate with one another to effectively prevent Communist collection and purchasing activities. However, satisfactory results have not been obtained because a number of servicemen, being unable to support their families on their low salaries, personally, or through their relatives, do business with the Communists in order to earn a profit. They take their risk of being jailed for such transactions. Particularly, a number of RVNAF officers, (including field grade officers) who can support their families, enthusiastically engage in activities or support merchants who sell supplies to the Communists. They even use manpower and facilities of their units in their personal activities in order to make more money.

Turning to the new environment created by the American withdrawal, the report chastised ARVN commanders for their failure
to adjust to changed conditions:

Presently, a number of ARVN outposts receive no maintenance. Unit commanding officers use the reason that they do not receive maintenance materials. The U.S. discontinued the supply of these materials after the cease-fire. Instead of using limited available materials, these ARVN units take no actions and their installations deteriorate. The clearing in a defense perimeter can be done with machetes by personnel of the unit. But these units request and wait for a dozer tractor and defoliation chemicals. In a situation where supplies are short, if these units still rely on supplies, disaster to the units can be expected.

Finally, the report asserted that "the soldiers are only determined to fight the enemy if they have good leaders" and concluded with this warning:

... if ARVN command echelons, especially battalion and company commanders, continue to do business with the Communists, embezzle public funds, take advantage of subordinates, and devote their attention to private business for personal gain, the RVANF cannot be appropriately improved and strong enough to cope with the Communists.

I was not surprised by these allegations, but I was concerned that they indicated an escalation of perennial ARVN problems at a time when amelioration of these weaknesses was urgently required. Furthermore, I found it significant that the MSS investigators regarded the situation as sufficiently grave to report their findings in writing to the Military Region commander. Equally noteworthy was the fact that these allegations of war profiteering and misconduct had found their way into American hands. This indicated to me that someone in the MSS was concerned that the findings of the report might be ignored if it remained solely in Vietnamese channels. Not surprisingly, this report attracted considerable attention in the DAO, particularly after CIS personnel quoted from it in the next MISTA briefing.

In reality, what could the Americans have done about the revelations in the MSS report? By 1974, the sad answer to this question was "little or nothing." It was simply too late and too far along in the ball game for us to exert any meaningful influence on the Vietnamese government and military to reform. The time to tackle this touchy issue had long since passed. By 1974, the system had persisted for too long, and too many people were culpable for any corrective measures to have had even a remote chance of success. One former Vietnamese district chief told me after the evacuation that any attempt to punish ARVN officers involved in corruption would have required a purge of such massive dimensions that it would have decimated the officer corps. Such action was simply impractical when it was considered in the context of the NVA threat. The South Vietnamese Army was caught in a dilemma. Corruption unquestion-
ably damaged troop morale, but the advanced state of the
disease precluded the cure. To have cut out the cancer would
have killed the patient. Therefore, the solution to the problem
was to do nothing, at least through the first half of 1974.
As pressures for reform mounted in the latter part of 1974,
President Thieu removed three of his four corps commanders and
cashiered hundreds of field grade officers. But, by then, the
Vietnamese people tended to view these moves as politically
inspired tokenism rather than genuine attempts to reform.
They were probably correct. Like it or not, we were committed
to the support of a system that was all too often its own worst
enemy.*

*I had always assumed that there was an appreciation of
the problem's significance in our Embassy, but General
Murray disagrees. Concerning corruption, the General
wrote me, "Martin's Embassy took no action. Martin, ex­
erienced in Thailand and Italy... dismissed the issue
with a knowing smile and 'a little corruption over here
oils the economic machinery.' Many agreed. I also agreed,
but not for that reason. If my family was starving, I'd
steal too...."
Major General John E. Murray, the first Defense Attache in Saigon after the ceasefire. He agonized over the congressional cuts in military assistance to the South Vietnamese.

Dottie Fitton (holding the book) confronted the Communists with a passionate appeal for information on her MIA son, an air force pilot. Also pictured is Mrs. Mary Raye, whose son was MIA.
of several hundred Communist negotiators whose presence in Saigon was one of the most distasteful aspects of the Paris Agreement for the South Vietnamese. It was one of the small ironies of the war that Spec 4 Davis' name ultimately played a role at the beginning and at the end of American involvement in Vietnam.

On this particular day, I served as escort officer and interpreter for Dottie, a graying and bespectacled mother from Connecticut who had come to Saigon with a delegation of American citizens concerned about relatives missing in action (MIA). Colonel Tu, the North Vietnamese negotiator, sipped from a cup of warm tea in spite of the oppressive heat. A fan spun lazily overhead, barely stirring the tepid air. On the wall behind the Colonel hung a picture of Ho Chi Minh.

Earlier in our meeting, the Communist officer had lectured Dottie on the many "crimes" committed by the American military, and, by implication, her son. His message had been clear and discouraging: American mothers should call on their government to cease its "illegal involvement in the internal affairs of Vietnam." Washington's continued support of President Nguyen van Thieu's "puppet regime" was the major obstacle to a settlement of all questions, including the MIA problem and the fate of her son, an air force pilot. Also pictured is Mrs. Mary Reyes, whose son was MIA.
of Lieutenant Colonel Crosley Fitton.

Dottie’s quest had already taken her to Washington, Paris, Vientiene, and Saigon, and she was too smart to be drawn into a political debate with an experienced professional like Colonel Tu. By emphasizing that she was an apolitical victim of the war -- a poor mother who had lost her son -- Dottie had carefully avoided a finger-shaking argument that she could not possibly have won. In the end, the colonel expressed his sympathy for her plight, accepted her son’s photo, and promised that he would relay her request to his government in Hanoi.

Dottie had won a major victory. By deftly playing her hand, she had not given Hanoi the opportunity to label her as “impudent” and “unrepentant” for America’s alleged crimes. I had suggested before her audience that it was fruitless to “demand” information from the North Vietnamese, and, although she had postured herself perfectly before Colonel Tu, I cautioned her against undue optimism.

I had now been involved in the MIA business for eight months, an experience that provided me with a new perspective on the tragedy that continued to engulf the Vietnamese people. As a member of the US delegation to the MIA talks, I added new dimensions to my understanding of why the war in Vietnam so stubbornly defied our best efforts to defuse it. Participating in the frustrating MIA negotiations gave me a new appreciation for the strength and determination of our Communist adversaries, not to mention a fresh perspective from which to assess our own position. During the war, I had interrogated hundreds of enemy prisoners and defectors and had developed a good understanding of what motivated the “other side.” But, in those days, I had been operationally oriented and concerned more with identifying exploitable enemy weaknesses than with assessing his strengths. I had found it relatively easy to satisfy this objective by patiently cultivating the many Vietcong and North Vietnamese sources that fell into my hands.

After joining the Joint Military Team, I soon sensed that I was involved in an entirely different ball game. Nothing could better symbolize the new ground rules than my advice to Dottie Fitton that her best approach would be a courteous and apolitical appeal to Colonel Tu. No longer were my Communist counterparts disenchanted defectors or frightened prisoners of war. My sources in 1971 and 1972 had been products of the almost

* Shortly after the fall of Saigon, Dottie’s well-executed appeal paid off. One of the first steps taken by Hanoi in its attempts to normalize relations with Washington was to repatriate the remains of several pilots as a gesture of good will. Among them was the body of her son.
total military and political defeat of the Vietcong and the costly decimation of the North Vietnamese legions that Hanoi had committed to shore up the crippled insurgency. The Paris Agreement had relegated these events to the scrapheap of history. They were, in a word, irrelevant. The Communist officers and men airlifted under diplomatic immunity to Saigon were relevant, and they saw themselves as winners. After all, was it not true that the South Vietnamese constitution outlawed Communism? And, in Hau Nghia province, had I not hunted Vietcong political and military cadre like animals, backed up by virtually every weapon in our arsenal short of "the bomb?" Our avowed objective had always been to prevent the Communists from entering Saigon, but my colleagues and I now dealt routinely with an enemy contingent that was defiantly ensconced under diplomatic protection in the heart of Saigon -- a testament to Communist perseverance and American frustration. The green-clad enemy officers had traversed a long and arduous path from their tunnel hideouts in War Zone "D" and Cambodia to the security of Camp Davis. One could "armchair quarterback" the nuances of the Paris Agreement all day, but, in the end, the fact remained that the signing ceremony in Paris had been quickly followed by the disestablishment of an American headquarters in Saigon (MACV) and the establishment of a Communist headquarters almost directly across the street. This reality was not lost on the South Vietnamese, and it was deeply symbolic that no American or South Vietnamese officers ever lived in Hanoi, except as prisoners of war.

My career in the MIA business had begun on schedule in February 1974 after Walt Mestre replaced me as the new deputy of the civilianized SSO shop. Anxious to get off to a good start with the hardnosed Chief of the US Delegation, I had vowed to heed the advice of the team adjutant and lay low while I learned my new job. "The Old Man believes that captains should be seen and not heard," was what I was told, and I tried to observe that guidance. Unfortunately, when the SSO civilians honored their departing military bosses at a rooftop party, no one thought to apply to the local police precinct for a party permit. Thus, shortly before midnight, a squad of Saigon police raided our innocent gathering, rounded up more than thirty of us, and took us to the local prefecture. Since I was the sole American who spoke Vietnamese, I confessed that I was the organizer of the illegal event in the mistaken belief that I could talk my way out of such a petty matter. Unfortunately, the local police chief was virulently anti-American
(an increasingly common disease in Saigon). We released the others but charged me with the heinous crime of sponsoring an illegal gathering and "holding girls closely and dancing without a permit." After spending the night at the prefecture, I was three hours late for my first duty day on the new job. I had not done too well at "lying low." Slinking sheepishly into the office, I reported to my immediate boss, Army Lieutenant Colonel Hank Lunde. Lieutenant Colonel Lunde was a Norwegian-American whose wartime heroism as an infantry captain had been documented in Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall's Battles of the Monsoons. A soft-spoken man with an incisive mind, he was the chief of the US Delegation's Negotiations Division. On this particular morning, Lunde listened with patient amusement to my account of the aborted "going-away" party and then promised me he would "straighten things out with the Chief," who had not been overjoyed to learn that his new officer had spent the night in the slammer! I had gotten off to an inauspicious beginning with a demanding boss.

I spent my first weeks in studying the history of the ten-month old MIA negotiations. As I reviewed the complex negotiating chronology, I saw that the delegation's efforts on behalf of some 2,500 families with relatives missing in action had met with delay and frustration. We had entered the negotiations under the naive assumption that implementation of Article 8(b) of the Paris Agreement spelling out the task of resolving the problem of the missing and the dead would be relatively easy. In fact, the delegation's files contained ample evidence that the first officers assigned to the team had commenced negotiations in the belief that MIA information could easily be exchanged in a matter of weeks or months at the most.

By the time I joined the delegation in early 1974, its staff of ten officers and five NCOs had not acquired the first scrap of information on a single missing American. The optimistic expectations in the early weeks of negotiation had long since evaporated. In their place was the sober reality of false Communist assurances that an immediate country-wide search would bring prompt release of MIA information. The North Vietnamese were no doubt engaged in a systematic collection of data on American MIA cases. However, as the cease-fire evolved into another phase of the protracted war and Hanoi realized that the South Vietnamese government would not voluntarily surrender power to some form of coalition government, hope for a prompt settlement of the MIA question faded. Human-
itarian concerns fell victim to the politics of the stillborn cease-fire.

The US Delegation had provided the Communists with dozens of folders on specific MIA cases, some of which established conclusively that Hanoi had captured American aviators but had not repatriated them. The North Vietnamese adamantly refused to discuss these substantive cases. American and South Vietnamese representatives insisted that the exchange of such information was an unconditional moral and legal obligation, and the Communists replied with a variety of procedural dodges and excuses, all of which clearly indicated their desire to exploit the politically sensitive MIA issue in the United States. Having successfully parlayed its possession of some 600 American POWs into a trump card during the Paris negotiations, Hanoi was clearly attempting to play the MIA issue for all possible political mileage. As I read and reread the summaries of the weekly negotiating sessions and the press releases of our adversaries, I detected a clear and unambiguous message. If the United States desired a resolution of the MIA issue, Washington must cease its support of the Saigon government, withdraw its alleged 20,000 "illegal advisors" from South Vietnam, and fulfill its commitment to contribute financially to "heal the wounds of war." This latter Communist demand was a reference to Article 21 of the Paris Agreement, which committed the United States to "...contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar construction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and throughout Indochina." It also reflected North Vietnamese determination that Washington should live up to President Nixon's commitment for economic aid totalling some 3.25 billion dollars. The President had conveyed this promise in a letter to the Hanoi government in January 1973, presumably to provide Hanoi with additional incentives for signing the Paris Agreement.

In short, the Hanoi government insisted on linking the MIA question with other political issues. Thus, at various times during the negotiations, Article 8(b) issues were tied to Article 21 "reparations," to Article 7(a) concerning the replacement of worn-out military equipment, or to the provisions that addressed the proposed political settlement between the South Vietnamese and the Vietcong under the aegis of the cease-fire. Stripped of all rhetoric, the Communist position reflected a firm determination to exact a price for any progress on the MIA issue. Hanoi's position was unshakeable. Progress on the
MIA issue depended on progress in other parts of the Paris
Agreement. The North Vietnamese were clearly prepared to
weather any criticism that such a policy was tantamount to
the unsavory practice of "bartering for bones." Since our
side was equally firm in insisting that the MIA question
should not in any way be linked to the other provisions of
the Paris Agreement and since President Nixon strongly advo­
cated continued support for the Thieu government, we recog­
nized that we had arrived at an impasse that all but precluded
any progress on the MIA question. We certainly would not sac­
rifice our ally in exchange for information on our missing
personnel. For its part, Hanoi seemed equally committed to
the belief that stalling on the MIA issue would generate
still another source of domestic pressure on the Nixon adminis­
tration to abandon the Saigon government. The polarization of
views could not have been more complete. The cease-fire had
not ended the war of words any better than it had stopped the
shooting.

While I immersed myself in the tangle of documents that
traced the negotiations, the war raged on unabated. I contin­
ued to attend the morning briefings in an effort to keep
abreast of the military situation. By now, a regular feature
of the morning walk-through was a status report on the siege
of Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, and the status of the
South Vietnamese rangers defending the encircled base at
Tong Le Chan in northern Tay Ninh province. Like so many of
the former American bases to which President Thieu’s over­
extended forces were committed, Tong Le Chan was a remote
border camp of questionable strategic significance. The
North Vietnamese had long since surrounded and cut off its
defenders, and it had assumed a symbolic importance not meri­
ted by its military value. Every morning, General Murray re­
cieved the latest logistical box score from Bill Marioletti,
a DAO civilian who worked closely with the South Vietnamese
air force on the elusive problem of resupplying the encircled
base by parachute. For a few weeks, Bill’s morning box scores
on the percentage of each drop that had landed in North Viet­
namese hands were the object of considerable good-natured
banter. One morning, the briefer revealed that the South Viet­
namese and North Vietnamese commanders had apparently agreed
tacitly to take turns in recovering the many bundles that
landed in the camp’s "no man’s land." After several reports
of shifts in the NVA antiaircraft units around the camp, some
of us theorized that the NVA high command was rotating anti-
aircraft artillery units to give its gunners target practice against the regular aerial resupply runs. Rumor even had it that Tong Le Chan duty was popular in the NVA ranks because they were so well supplied by the South Vietnamese.

The seige of Tong Le Chan was symptomatic of fundamental flaws that permitted such a battle to continue for weeks at a time during a so-called cease-fire, even though the Paris Agreement contained provisions for coping with truce violations. One of the protocols to the agreement established a four-nation International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) to supervise the cease-fire, with teams deployed countrywide. Theoretically, the teams would control the introduction of military supplies into the country and investigate violations of the truce. In reality, the ICCS, like the Joint Military Team, was the victim of the political deadlock between the two sides. To make matters worse, it included two Communist (Poland and Hungary) and two non-Communist parties (Canada and Indonesia -- the Canadians quickly sensed that their presence was futile and withdrew. They were replaced by Iran) and operated on the principle of unanimity. Thus, it could conduct no investigation of alleged cease-fire violations unless all four members agreed. Predictably, when the Communists were the apparent violators, the Poles and Hungarians vetoed the investigation, and, if the Saigon government's forces appeared guilty, the Iranians or the Indonesians nixed the probe.

With their organization effectively paralyzed, ICCS personnel whiled away their days sunning at the DAO pool and earned a pair of nicknames for their organization. The quick-witted Saigonese insisted that "ICCS" stood for "Im cho coi sao" or "Wait quietly and watch how things turn out." Not to be outdone, Saigon's English-speaking community argued that the letters stood for "I can't control (expletive deleted)."

The four officers who worked in my office became known as the delegation's "think tank," a reference to our job of preparing initiatives and responses for use in the weekly negotiations with the Communists. We received limited guidance for conducting the negotiations from the Embassy's political-military affairs section. I spent much of my time in drafting statements for delivery by the chief and in writing position papers on various aspects of the negotiations.

Every Tuesday and Thursday morning at ten o'clock, representatives of the four parties met at a conference site on Tan Son Nhut. Seated around a large circular conference table covered with green felt, the American and South Viet-
namese delegations would spar for three hours with representatives of the Provisional Revolutionary Government -- the Vietcong (PRG) -- and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam -- North Vietnam. These negotiating sessions were little more than vain and tedious attempts to convince our Communist adversaries that we should get down to business on the exchange of MIA information. Needless to say, the Hanoi and Vietcong delegates were hardly receptive to this approach. On many occasions, the entire three hours would elapse without even an agreement on the agenda for discussion. If the American or South Vietnamese delegate spoke first, one could predict that he would offer a proposal for discussion of some substantive MIA issue. Typically, the United States might ask for a North Vietnamese reply to an earlier query concerning the fate of a pilot who had been captured but not repatriated. The Communist replies seldom varied. Week after week, the PRG and DRV delegates would ignore our appeals for substantive discussions and reply instead with long and strident prepared statements condemning the United States for initiating, waging, and prolonging the war. Over and over, they reminded us of our "crimes against the Vietnamese people" and our "sabotage" of the Paris Agreements. To support their position, they frequently cited the views of "the progressive American people," among whom they numbered Jane Fonda, Senator Fulbright, and other "doves" in the US Congress. As "backup officer" at these sessions, I took notes for use in reporting any results, and I supplied my boss with an occasional hastily scrawled note if I picked up something unusual in the repetitious Communist diatribe. After several weeks of such exposure, I came to dread these charades and realized that we were indeed engaged in a hopeless task.

As repugnant as I found the repressive features of the Hanoi government, I could see that the North Vietnamese view of their cause would be most compelling to their soldiers and citizens. Captain To, a member of the Hanoi delegation, summed up his government's unofficial position for me one day during a coffee break:

Of course we have information on many of your MIA personnel, and in some cases even the remains of your pilots we shot down. And you must know that we do not like to keep them. Their graves defile our ancestral soil, and are ugly reminders of the horrors of the bombing of our country. So we want to give them back. But why should we give them to you for nothing? Your government has done so much damage to our people and our land that it must pay. That is your obligation, and even your president committed himself to this. So we will not give you what you want just because you ask for it or demand it.
Had I been a North Vietnamese, I would undoubtedly have agreed with Captain To, but, when I donned my American hat, I was also aware that General Giap's artillery had inflicted extensive damage all over South Vietnam in the name of "liberating the oppressed southerners," most of whom wanted no part of Hanoi-style communism. There were simply no blacks and whites to the situation by 1974, and all parties to that unfortunate conflict could assume a share of the blame. President Nixon had pledged to the American people that we would spare no effort to provide the fullest possible accounting of our missing servicemen. All of us who grappled daily with this responsibility did our utmost to fulfill this commitment. Unfortunately, it was beyond our power to compel the Communists to accept our view that the MIA question was purely a humanitarian matter that should not be linked to the other political problems of the cease-fire. The days when we could force the Communists to do anything had come to an end.

VII. THE BIG LIE

"Someone in Hanoi must have read Mein Kampf and The Goebbels Diaries," I called out to my office mate as I struggled through the tedious morning ritual of reading the daily transcripts of Radio Hanoi. Even though the themes seldom varied, everyone on our team scanned the copy regularly for any signs of change in Hanoi's hard line on the MIA question. The lead item was a smug attack on "Governor General Martin," Hanoi's mocking nickname for "the American neocolonialist," Ambassador Graham Martin. Martin, Hanoi insisted, should recognize the futility of his attempts to "prop up the puppet army of Nguyen van Thieu." As usual, General Murray and the Defense Attache Office took a hit as the "control headquarters" for an alleged secret army of "20,000 illegal American military advisors."

As untrue and absurd as these allegations were, there were compelling reasons why they were a fundamental part of Hanoi's position. Certainly no American military men remained in Vietnam other than the mere handful of officers who worked out